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ABSTRACT

In a beginning level creative writing class called "Narration and Description," two student-written stories were collectively peer edited during each session. The class was required to read the student texts before class, critique them, and, with the guidance of four assigned student facilitators, discuss the texts with the author and the class. In one text, the author's stylized effort at dialect and the pervasive use of metaphors and similes indicated that he was a literate writer, familiar with the tropes of narration. Yet his paper had a few spelling errors, inadvertent tense shifts, and grammatical inconsistencies--like other stories critiqued that semester. During the peer editing session, one facilitator asked the author if the misspellings were intentional in an attempt to construct black dialect. This offended the author, who angrily replied, "Wat'cha think? I can't spell?" The class divided along racial lines, with the African-Americans accusing the facilitator of racism. This event had relatively little to do with spelling and much to do with the power to speak from a position of authority, which some students felt they lacked. Analyzing the incident from the standpoint of postcolonialism, one faces the contradictory and paradoxical challenge of attempting to critique, define, evaluate, and ultimately "speak for" the subaltern group, the African-American students in the class. The subjugation of indigenous language is a potent colonizing instrument of oppression. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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"'Wat'chu Think? I Can't Spell?': Constructing Literacy in the Postcolonial Classroom."

by

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"'Wat'cha Think? I Can't Spell?':
Constructing Literacy in the Postcolonial Classroom"

Last semester I taught a course called Narration and Description, a beginning level creative writing class. During each session, we would collectively peer edit two student-written stories. The class was required to read the student texts before class, critique them, and, with the guidance of four assigned student facilitators, discuss the texts with the author and the class.

The story we critiqued that day was called "A Life in Harlem," by an African-American student named Johnnie Jones. Written in black, Southern dialect, in epistolary narration, it was the story of a young African-American woman, Kendalon, who leaves her family's share-cropping farm in Athens, Georgia to work in a New York furniture factory during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. The narration consisted of Kendalon's letters to her sister, Mary, who remained in Athens. The story begins with Kendalon's first letter home, which describes her transition to her life in Harlem. Kendalon begins:

> Hello, Mary, how have you been this past month? I am sorry that I didn't get a chance to write you more these past two months, but I have been working very long hours at the furniture factory. The minutes seem to be as long as months, and the hours as long as years while I am at work. I reckon the time is as stiff as the bark of the

> old pecan tree. The tree that did not budge when last falls tornado's harsh winds tore the out-house off the ground and shattered it against the tree. I ain't never gone get used to stitching up cloth for almost nine hours straight, but it's hard to find a job that pays $2.40 an hour. (Jones 1)

As the story progresses, Kendalon's exposure to the intellectual life and energy of Harlem begins a journey of ethnic self-discovery; she sees Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones," and remarks that she "was so excited to see a play about black folks" (Jones 4). She has an opportunity to speak with the poet Claude McKay when he visits a local library, and she hears Marcus Garvey speak about returning home to the promised land of Africa. "He opened my eyes," Kendalon writes to Mary, "to a lot of things that I did not think about before" (Jones 5). The story ends with Kendalon's letter home promising that she will try and get Mary a job in the factory so that the two women can finally be united.

Like many of the students in the class, this was Johnnie's first attempt at writing a short story, and it was remarkably thoughtful. His stylized effort at dialect and the pervasive use of metaphors and similes indicated that Johnnie was a literate writer, familiar with the tropes of narration. Yet, his paper had a few spelling errors, inadvertant tense shifts, and grammatical inconsistencies--not unlike most of the stories we had critiqued that semester.

During the peer editing session, one of the student facilitators, Brian, a young, white man, asked Johnnie if the misspellings were "intentional." Johnnie glared at Brian, who sat across the room from him in the semi-circle, but he remained silent, refusing to answer Brian's question. Brian, sensing that in some way he had offended Johnnie, went on to cite examples of the misspellings. "You spelled "ya'll" with two "L's" on this page but with one "L" on the other." In essence, Brian was asking Johnnie if the misspellings were an attempt on Johnnie's part to construct black dialect, and, if so, he had used the vernacular misspellings haphazardly. In response, Johnnie locked his eyes with Brian and angrily replied, "Wat'cha think? I can't spell?"

Brian stammered, struggling to defend his position, but Johnnie repeated his phrase several times, "Wat'cha think? I can't spell," perhaps as a challenge to Brian to answer the question. Instantly, the class had divided along racial lines, with the African-American students erupting in shouts to Brian that he was racist and that his comment was inappropriate. Not surprisingly, the white students sided with Brian, arguing that his question was a legitimate one and that his job as editor and facilitator was to bring up all matters related to the text--including the more superficial elements of writing, such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The same comments, they reasoned would apply to any writer, regardless of race. Realizing that I had lost control of the class, I tried to placate Johnnie's anger by suggesting that

Brian's question had to do with consistency rather than with the vernacular itself. But no matter how much I attempted to explicate Brian's original comment, or my own position, the more volatile the discussion became. The palpable anger and resentment which permeated the classroom made it, it seemed to me at the time, impossible to continue with the editing session. Instead of attempting to confront, engage, or address the racial issue which had emerged from a seemingly innocuous peer discussion, I dismissed class early. The next meeting, we never discussed the paper, and Johnnie never returned to class, but he also did not officially drop the course. On the last day of class, a "friend" of his dropped off a slightly revised version of "A Life in Harlem." I suppose Johnnie hoped he could somehow salvage a passing grade even though he had missed more than half the semester's classes. I gave Johnnie an "F."

Before the end of the semester, when I collected my students' journals, several African-American students expressed their dissatisfaction with my involvement in the discussion and insisted that I was complicitous with the racism espoused by Brian. I was angered by the accusation. How, I wondered, could it be racist to suggest that someone misspelled a word? Is it impossible for me, as a white person, to level intellectual criticism at an African American and not have it reduced to a racist attack?

After the incident, I realize that it was my failing not to have drawn the class back into the discussion of race and to

analyze what exactly happened in the classroom and why; as a white, woman I was afraid to confront black anger, and so, as ultimate authority figure, I had summarily dismissed it. But this analysis of the event is insufficient and does not explain why Johnnie had perceived the attack as racist in the first place, and why, at the time, I did not.

It was a short time later, when I read an article by Linda Alcoff called "The Problem of Speaking for Others," that it occurred to me that what had transpired that afternoon in my classroom had relatively little to do with spelling and much to do with the power to speak from a position of authority, a position which Johnnie and the other African-American students obviously felt they lacked. Alcoff reminds us that, "Rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act of political struggle" (293). It was with Alcoff's insight, and my nascent familiarity with postcolonial critics such as Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said, that the classroom incident began to clarify itself. By recognizing the subject position of the speaker (in that case, the white student, Brian, and myself), and the sheer political act of peer critique, I suggest that the intensity of the racial rift had to do with the perception by my African-American students that Brian's comment was an attempt to colonize their personal language--an effort, whether intentional or not, to

diminish and denigrate their cultural, political, and social reality.

I share this incident as an invitation to examine the responsibilities students, teachers, and peers play in negotiating meaning in a text. In addition, I would like to envision a means to construct a postcolonial pedagogy which takes into consideration Eurocentric rules of binary constructions and oppositions, and acknowledges that "all discourses--even those of freedom and liberation--carry with them ideological traces and selective interests" (McLauren 183). Further, the application of these interests in the classroom, as we encounter Others, is inevitably an ethical concern (Olson), and one which postcolonial theory might be suited to address.

The Postcolonial Bind: Who Speaks For the Subaltern?

In analyzing the incident from the standpoint of postcolonialism, I am placed in an intellectually precarious position, facing the contradictory and paradoxical challenge of attempting to critique, define, evaluate, and ultimately "speak for" the subaltern group, the African-American students in my class, and by doing so, fall prey to the old colonizing sleight-of-hand of gazing outward at the Other as I inescapably replicate my own ideology. Molefi Kete Asante asserts in *The Afrocentric Idea*, that this critical bind is unavoidable. He writes that if

> we examine the flow of rhetoric in Western thought, we will see that even when the rhetorician poses as a critic in the interests of the oppressed, that critic seems incapable of the divestment of Eurocentric views. Criticism becomes criticism within a European context, a sort of ruthless intellectual game in which scores are kept but the oppressed are not even represented. (167)

While I cannot dispute the validity of Asante's position, I also find it harshly proscriptive and deterministic, never allowing the scholar an opportunity for engagement or reflection. It is this view of a limited voice, the inability to speak based on the restrictions of color or gender which Spivak calls, rather derisively, "chromaticism" or "genitalism," depending, of course, on the particular objection you are making toward speaking. Instead, I would like to offer a position which does not negate Asante's argument, but instead renegotiates our position of authority. If the cultural critic's magic trick, like the colonist's, is the illusion of distance, the pretense of shifting the gaze, then the remedy is to show the trick from behind. Find where the magician stores the ace in the sleeve, the penny in the palm, or the rabbit under the table. Spivak believes that this repositioning of speaking is possible, saying that you will not speak in the same way as the Other, but rather through a "*historical* critique of your position as the investigating person, then you will see that you have earned the right to criticize, and

you will be heard" (62).

Postcolonial scholarship, like cultural studies and some composition theory, attempts to interrogate the function of agency and asymmetrical power relationships. Postcolonial studies traces a variety of colonial relationships, including cultural and aesthetic forms, as well as offering a critique of the institutionalization of the objective and scientific disciplines, with their claim of neutrality and "truth." Postcolonial investigation reveals several things:

> First, [postcolonial theory] attempt[s] to show that particular discourses of knowledge or art are neither objective nor universal, but were constructed out of and in service of the project of colonial domination. Second, [it] seek[s] to reveal that these forms of representation are thus not specifically "European" in origin, but the creations of colonial interactions. (Buell 223)

If, then, the intellectual application of postcolonial scholarship is to unearth the ossified remains of colonial ideology, it seems wholly reasonable that such modes of inquiry will inevitably amplify our discussion in composition theory, where we continue to investigate constructions of race, gender, and ethnicity. Further, scholars like Gary Olson view postcolonial theory as a means to "illuminate how despite students' attempts to 'empower' themselves by learning to inhabit subject position, and despite our own

efforts to facilitate this process, we construct students as Other, reinforcing their position in the margins where it is doubly difficult to gain the kind of empowerment we ostensibly wish to encourage" (n. pag). Additionally, as composition scholars have been positing for the last twenty years, it is the dominating nature of academic discourse which invariably reinforces this marginalization and is evinced, as Homi Bhabha demonstrates, in the hegemonic structure of the English language itself. As we have learned not only through postcolonial discourse but through cultural criticism, the subjugation of indigenous language is a potent colonizing instrument of oppression.

The Construction of Literacy and Cultural Identity

Given the incendiary response by my African-American students from an *apparently* uncontentious suggestion that a word was misspelled, leads consideration to Bhabha's claim that the sentence itself "implies subjections, subordinations, [and] internal reactions" ("Postcolonial Authority" 57). Johnnie, it seems to me, was not merely angered by Brian's suggestion that he essentially did not use language properly, but rather by Brian's unintentional implication that Johnnie did not even possess the rudimentary tools of academic literacy to construct a narrative, and that a story written in his native discourse was immediately suspect.

It is, in fact, this gentle mist of subtext which seeped into

the classroom. The historical reality of African-American oppression--in all its sundry forms--merged in that moment, in what Bhabha has termed "enunciative agency," the ability to articulate one's subject position, not through the discourse of domination, but through the language of one's culture, with its certain shifting of temporal and spatial boundaries. Enuciative agency is the relationship between "temporality and meaning in the present utterance, in the performativity of a history of the present; in the political struggle around the "true"...Our attention is occupied with the relationship of authority which secure professional, political, and pedagogical status through the strategy of speaking in a particular time and from a specific space" ("Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt" 57).

The very inscription of social power in the utterance of The Word is what Terry Eagleton has traced to lexical, syntactic, and grammatical structures. So, for example, the use of an abstract noun, or switching from active to passive voice, may "serve to obscure the concrete agency of a social event in ways convenient for ruling ideological interests" (196). This view is particularly applicable to the African-American community, who, as Asante notes, has faced the debilitating effects that Euro-American cultural ideology has played on its culture--in particular, teachers' perceptions that Black students fail to achieve academic success, which Assante claims is an inescapable adaptation to White racism (McLauren 174).

Because white racism functions as a dominating ideological influence, African Americans have historically been unable to accurately reflect their own cultural representation, even at the very core of language; this is nothing new, and Bhabha has analyzed this representative split in traditionally marginalized groups as the disparity between "cultural diversity" and "cultural differences." Cultural diversity is "culture as an object of empirical knowledge--whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of cultural as. . .adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification" ("Cultural" 206). Simply, cultural diversity, or *multi-culturalism*, attempts to exoticize the Other, or worse, creates, as Henry Giroux has argued, an "identity politics," which is separatist, essentialist, and thereby ineffective, since it fails to unify positions, and its unenviable demise is de-politicalization rather than social action. Conversely, cultural difference articulates cultural hybridity, which allows for enunciation of identity to occur, problematizing the division between past and present at the level of cultural representation. Postcolonial theory allows for a reconstitution of cultural representation, mediated through what Bhabha refers to as a "time lag." It is the

> interruptive overlap between symbol and sign, between synchronicity and caesura or seizure (not diachronicity). In each symbolic structure of a 'homogeneous empty time' there is the repetition of the iterative stoppage or

> caesura of the sign which is not so much arbitrary as "interruptive," not so much a closure as a liminal interrogation "without" words of the culturally given, traditional boundaries of knowledge. ("Postcolonial Authority" 59)

This interruption, or caesura of the ideological signs which are used to construct identity, enables a shifting of perspectives, allowing, ultimately, for intellectual freedom and political empowerment. It is this "time-lag," this break in the temporal representation, which allows for the process of agency "both as a historical development and as the narrative agency of historical discourse." (Bhabha, "In a Spirit" 330). Further, this sign shifting, inversions and subversions of dominating influences, is strategically employed as a means by subaltern groups to gain power. This linguistic tactical maneuvering has been particularly useful, as Henry Louis Gates makes clear, in the African American community.

Shifting the Sign

"A Life in Harlem" was indeed a subaltern text, both in terms of its stylized use of black vernacular and in its subject of a young *woman* (interestingly enough) confronting racism while she gains an emerging sense of black consciousness and pride. The story is profoundly paradigmatic of what Gates has analyzed as being a staple of African-American folklore and literature--the

Monkey tales. Gates examines the monkey figure as a rhetorical principle in African-American vernacular discourse and as the symbol of "an oral writing within black vernacular language rituals" (52). The Signifying Monkey wreaks havoc upon the Signified in the way that subaltern groups subvert, mimic, and disrupt the original signs of the dominant culture and appropriate them for themselves. The Monkey always dethrones the Lion (key figures in the folklore tales) because the "Lion cannot read the nature of his discourse" (Gates 85). The Monkey speaks figuratively and the Lion literally, and it is the Lion's inability to comprehend the complex nature of the discourse, the "double-voiced" utterance, which ultimately leads to his demise. Johnnie's literary protagonist, Kendalon, uses such signifyin(g) to feign ignorance. She writes, "I sure do get a kick of pretending to be ignorant when I am around white folks. White folks are sure easily fooled, because they assume color folk can't read no way. I reckon they would be pretty offended if they knew I could read" (Jones 4). By seizing the apparatus of value-coding--in this instance, proscribed forms of literacy--Kendalon has succeeded in shifting the agonistic terrain. The problem with disrupting dominant discourse is that, as bell hooks notes, the common language is "rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge" (25). If Kendalon is subverting the dominate white culture by inverting the sign, i.e. blacks *can't* read, she *can* read, she *pretends* she can't read--then likewise, Johnnie has done the same.

It is this "sly civility" that Bhabha claims characterizes subaltern discourse: the pretense of compliance. "Wat'cha think? I can't spell?" was Johnnie's challenge to Brian, to me, and to the predominantly white, academic, literate structure I represent. For that moment in my class, Johnnie was transformed into Kendalon; blacks *can't* spell, Johnnie *can* spell, white culture *believes* that Johnnie can't spell, and the colonist desire to replicate its signs, create literacy in its own narcissistic image, has once again been reinforced. But in that volatile instant, Johnnie wrenched me away from the mirror, forcing me to divert my gaze from the lure of my own reflection.

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